

Q&A CNN INTERNATIONAL January 29, 2002 Tuesday



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CNN INTERNATIONAL

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BYLINE: Zain Verjee, John King

HIGHLIGHT:

A look at possible sanctions the United States could impose on Palestinians, including severing ties with Yasser Arafat.

BODY:

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(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I am disappointed in Yasser Arafat. He must make a full effort to rout out terror in the Middle East.

DICK CHENEY, VICE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: He knows what he has to do. He needs to control the violence emanating from Palestine, Gaza, the West Bank, against Israeli civilians.

ZAIN VERJEE, CNN ANCHOR (voice-over): Candid criticisms of the Palestinian leader from the White House, a clear signal: do something about the violence, or else.

Or else what? Some in Washington say the severing of ties with Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority. Is that the way to go?

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: The dialogue with the PLO and the contacts with the PLO and with Chairman Arafat serves the interest of peace. Any interruption of those relations would definitely be counterproductive.

VERJEE: Israel says Arafat's actions are counterproductive.

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SIMON PERES, ISRAELI FOREIGN MINISTER: Yasser Arafat, too, must understand that the road to peace is a political road, not a road of terror.

VERJEE: On Q&A, should the United States cut off ties with the Palestinian Authority.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VERJEE: Welcome to Q&A.

Almost every day, someone is killed in the Middle East. Sometimes it's an Israeli. Sometimes it's a Palestinian. Both sides blame each other. There's bloody retribution and the violence spins on and on.

Now the United States has taken a position that could shift policy in the Middle East and effect the situation on the ground.

Here's CNN's John King.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOHN KING, CNN CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): The president made clear his patience with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is running short.

BUSH: You know, ordering up weapons that were intercepted on a boat headed for that part of the world is not part of fighting terror. That's enhancing terrorism, and I was very disappointed in him.

KING: Top advisors say Mr. Bush is angry that Mr. Arafat continues to deny Palestinian Authority involvement in a major arms shipment seized by Israel earlier this month.

Senior U.S. officials say there is clear evidence and that Mr. Bush held an animated discussion with his national security team Friday to discuss options.

They include the dramatic step of severing United States ties with the Palestinian Authority and several lesser sanctions: adding Arafat's security force to the United States list of terrorist groups, closing the Palestinian Authority's Washington office, and ending or suspending the work of Bush's special Mideast envoy, Anthony Zinni.

Members of Congress just back from the region are among those demanding a tougher United States line.

REP. GARY ACKERMAN (D), NEW YORK: We have to take steps and say you have not kept your end of the deal, we're not giving you this basket of goodies.

KING: But some international policy veterans say punishing Mr. Arafat could prove counterproductive.

LEE HAMILTON, WOODROW WILSON CENTER: I don't know what the alternative is, and to isolate him, which is another word of saying humiliating him, I do not think is the path to peace.

KING: Sources tell CNN Mr. Arafat is being told he must quickly acknowledge Palestinian Authority involvement in the arms shipment, arrest and detain close advisors implicated in the arms deal, and drop what the White House considers a reluctance to crack down on terror groups operating in the Palestinian territories.

COLIN POWELL, SECRETARY OF STATE: He knows what is expected of the Palestinian Authority and of him as the leader of that authority.

KING: The president appealed for help last week in letters to the leaders of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Bush asked them to pressure Mr. Arafat and shared some of what one senior official said was compelling and conclusive evidence that senior Palestinian Authority officials were involved in the weapons shipment.

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Secretary Powell is said by sources to favor incremental sanctions if Mr. Arafat does not act soon. Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld favor breaking relations.

Administration officials say there is no firm deadline for the president to make a decision on sanctions. But one senior official put it this way, Mr. Arafat -- quote -- "should not think for a minute that time is on his side."

John King, CNN, the White House.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VERJEE: Joining us from Washington now, is Robert Satloff. He's the executive director for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Robert, do you think the United States will sever ties with Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority?

ROBERT SATLOFF, WINEP: There is an intensive debate underway at the highest levels of the administration just about this.

The mere fact that we are having this debate in Washington is itself a sign of how far the entire issue has moved in the American policy circles. Will they in fact sever ties? I don't know. Perhaps. It is quite a change of policy.

The path of least resistance is of course just to be a bit tougher on Arafat, a bit tougher on the Palestinians. Will they go all the way? It's a big decision. I don't think the president has made it yet. I think a lot will depend on how he sees the reaction of such a decision might play in the context of the wider war on terrorism.

VERJEE: Do you think that any decision that's taken on either one of those counts, either to sever ties or impose these lesser sanctions that you're talking about, and that John King just mentioned, would be counterproductive in the Middle East?

SATLOFF: Well, I think if one takes the longer view, I think that chances are that it will be helpful and constructive.

It was difficult before the Karine-A weapons boat. It was difficult to contemplate dealing further with the chairman because of his complicity or acts of omission or commission in the fight against terrorism. But the weapons boat I think does change the mind-set in Washington in many respects, because here you have the Palestinian Authority reaching out and doing business with America's foremost ideological and operational adversary in the region, Iran, which is the leading state sponsor of terrorism, to supply a huge cache of weapons for use in a military conflict against Israel.

That changes the regional dynamic, and that changes the fundamental way of thinking about the situation, as far as Washington is concerned.

VERJEE: I just want to point out to, though, that the Palestinian Authority and Yasser Arafat has denied complicity or involvement in the shipment on the Karine-A.

But with a shift in the mind-set in Washington, in United States policy, is it possible that the United States can then be perceived as an honest broker in any way in the Middle East?

SATLOFF: Well, I think should there be such a decision by the United States, it will likely be coupled with a declaration reemphasizing how much America wants to proceed down the path of helping to create an independent Palestinian state at peace with Israel. And all the things the United States would do to help push that process forward, should there be a Palestinian leadership that is truly committed to peaceful resolution of conflict.

I think the goal would be to try to separate our desire for an outcome, an independent Palestine at peace with Israel, from this particular Palestinian leadership. Possibly we could do that, and possibly we could actually make positive inroads among the people of the region, but that is still very much an open question.

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VERJEE: Here's what Yasser Arafat had to say when speaking in an interview on Israeli television in December last year about the United States. Just take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

YASSER ARAFAT, CHAIRMAN, PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (via interpreter): Who is standing by you? The Americans. Who sends you the planes? The Americans. Who sends you the tanks? The Americans. Who sends you the money? The Americans. Don't mention the Americans to me.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

VERJEE: A lot of resentment against the United States we're hearing there from Yasser Arafat. What do you think of that?

SATLOFF: Well, I think if you go back over the last decade, we've seen histrionics go up and down. The fact is that Yasser Arafat has always sought a relationship with Washington. It has been a key strategic objective of his. I think the United States is correct to think that a turn by the Palestinian Authority to a strategic relationship with Iran must call into question what sort of relationship we should have with the Palestinian Authority.

VERJEE: But you don't think that anything Yasser Arafat had to say there sort of clouds the way the United States is perceived in the Middle East and that they actually can't be honest brokers, whatever they do, if that's the perception and the resentment?

SATLOFF: No. I think if you look at the various statements by the officials in the region. Crown Prince Abdullah in today's "Washington Post," even he talks about excellent relations with the United States while recognizing that there is a difference of opinion on the issues of Israel and the Palestinians.

We don't have across the Middle East today riots from Rabat to Oman in support of Yasser Arafat. We don't have the leaders of the region publicly clamoring for America to resuscitate Yasser Arafat. He is the one who is very isolated, who has very few friends.

I think it is fair to say that people around the region are concerned about the fate of the Palestinians, and it is very important for the United States to be concerned about the fate of the Palestinians. We want to be friends with the Palestinian people, but right now we have to deal with the fact that the Palestinian leadership seems to have made decisions which run fundamentally contrary to its commitment to peaceful resolution of conflict.

VERJEE: Does the United States have any clear strategy on what to actually do in the long-term rather than dealing with just these short-term measures which could potentially backfire?

SATLOFF: Well, right now the larger context of American efforts in the Middle East revolve around the war on terrorism. Thankfully, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as horrible as it has been over the last 16 months of uprising, it has not spread beyond the Israeli-Palestinian arena.

So there is a great sigh of relief that indeed Arab states, Egypt, Jordan specifically, have not gotten involved militarily on the side of the Palestinians in the conflict with Israeli. Maintaining this conflict management approach of keeping the conflict limited as far as possible has proven very successful.

As we look into the long-term, I don't think there is anybody in Washington who believes that a real peace deal can be done with the current leadership of the Palestinian Authority.

VERJEE: Robert Satloff, we'll have to leave it there. The executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Thanks for being on Q&A.

SATLOFF: You're welcome.

VERJEE: Coming up, Israeli and Palestinian perspectives on the United States' tough talk.

You're watching Q&A.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

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VERJEE: Welcome back.

How will an apparently changing United States policy in the Middle East effect the crisis there?

Joining us from New York, Alon Pinkas, the Israeli counsel general, and in Washington, Hassan Abdel Rahman, the chief Palestinian representative to the United States. Thank you both for being with us on Q&A.

Hassan, you first. The Americans say they are disappointed in Yasser Arafat. They want him to do more. They're talking of severing ties, imposing lesser sanctions. You're aware of that. What's your response?

HASSAN ABDEL RAHMAN, CHIEF PALESTINIAN REP. TO THE U.S.: My response is what the Europeans said yesterday to President Bush. They said that his statement was unfair, that his statement is not helpful, and that the United States, by doing this, will undercut itself from being an honest, acceptable broker in the Middle East peace process.

They called on the United States to consider Yasser Arafat as a serious partner in peace. And they were very critical of the policies of Mr. Sharon in the Palestinian territories, which are creating a climate of anger, frustration among the Palestinian people, because killing Palestinians, demolishing homes, keeping 3.2 million Palestinians under siege for so long is absolutely not the way to achieve the calm that we desire in the territories, and to go back to the peace process that we want with the Israelis.

VERJEE: Alon Pinkas, were President Bush's comments unhelpful, unfair?

ALON PINKAS, ISRAELI COUNSEL GENERAL: No, I don't think that they were neither. I think if Mr. Arafat learns from President Bush or indeed from the entire American system on how to conduct business and how to be a leader, he would do well to perform a State of the Union address to the Palestinians and explain to the Palestinian people -- in a state of disunion, rather -- why he failed them for so many years, why he failed them in the last 15 months. Why he failed the peace process, why he failed American trust.

And in that context, you have to look at President Bush's remarks. No one was a better friend of the Palestinian cause than President Clinton, and they double crossed him. No one was a better friend of the Palestinian right for self-determination than the three last successful last Israeli governments, and they betrayed our trust.

And I think it's about time that honest Palestinian politicians, as Mr. Abdel Rahman, who is on this show with me, ask themselves a very simple question: what did this Palestinian leadership deliver to the Palestinian people except for misery, tragedy and death?

VERJEE: I want to take a look, though, at some of the sanctions that are being touted around that could potentially happen. There's a possibility, Mr. Rahman, that your office could be closed in the United States. Is that true? Can that happen?

RAHMAN: Well, I hope not. I hope not.

But let me go back to what Mr. Pinkas just said. You know that he is pointing fingers at what is the responsibility of Yasser Arafat, but he is not saying that the Palestinian people have been living under Israeli occupation for 35 years. That Israeli has stolen Palestinian land and built Jewish settlements. That Palestinian leaders have been killed. Palestinian children have been made orphans. Palestinian women have been made widows. That our future has been stolen away from us.

Israeli has turned the Palestinian people from a peaceful people into an angry people, a violent people, because no people in the world, name me one people, who can live under foreign military occupation of other people for 35 years and do not react.

Mr. Pinkas, let me just...

VERJEE: Make your point and have Alon respond to that.

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RAHMAN: What I am saying is, Mr. Pinkas, I suggest that you look at the behavior of Israel. The criminal behavior of the Israeli army, which was protested today by 50 officers and 50 Israeli soldiers who decided not to serve in the West Bank and Gaza because of the atrocities that the Israeli army is committing against the Palestinians there.

VERJEE: Mr. Pinkas.

PINKAS: Mr. Rahman would do well to stop with the self-pity and all those years of denial and this ongoing monologue that leads nowhere. You should experiment with telling the truth, at least to your self if not to CNN viewers, Mr. Abdel Rahman.

VERJEE: What do you mean by that?

PINKAS: I'll tell you exactly what I mean, Zain. The occupation we sought to end, and we called in Camp David. The Palestinians never showed up, and I'm sorry to use that line again and again and again, but it's enough living in this denial.

The Palestinian leadership let down President Clinton, let down at least half of the Israeli, public, and let down 90 percent of the Palestinian people.

This is not about occupation. And this anger and lack of future that you contend that we've brought about you, brought on to you, rather, is ridiculous, and you know it.

It's not as if the Palestinians were a thriving democracy, nor are the a thriving democracy right now. It is self-inflicted tragedy after tragedy.

Let me just conclude with one sentence, Zain.

VERJEE: Briefly.

PINKAS: This tragedy has been going on since 1948, for five decades, in which the Palestinians, and I know it's a cliché, but you've got to say what you've got to say, the Palestinians have missed every single opportunity that they had, that the world and Israel, presented to them.

VERJEE: OK. Look, there are clear arguments on both sides, but for the next few minutes I want to focus on the United States' decisions, its apparent change in policy in the region, and how it's going to effect the Middle East.

Mr. Pinkas, do you want the United States to cut ties with Yasser Arafat? That's one of the things that's being put on the table. And if you do, what will that achieve and is that the right way to go?

PINKAS: Zain, it's inappropriate for me to say what I think the United States should or ought to do. I think the United States...

VERJEE: What does Israel want?

PINKAS: Well, Israel wants the United States to remain committed to peace. And Israel wants the United States to be involved...

VERJEE: So does that mean that cutting ties and other sanctions...

PINKAS: I'll explain in a second. And Israel wants the United States to remain committed to stability in the region. Israel wants the United States to remain politically linked and tied.

In order to do that, the United States needs an interlocutor, and the United States needs a partner on the Palestinian side. And what you see in the United States in the last 15 months, but especially in the last two or three months, is a realization that Mr. Arafat has exhausted his life span or outlived his usefulness as a political partner.

He is not credible. He is not trustworthy. He cannot deliver a deal. He cannot deliver it internally for the Palestinians. He cannot deliver it to Israel, and he certainly abused the trust of the United States of America.

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So I'm not...

VERJEE: One way Yasser Arafat has undermined his own credibility, according to the United States and Israel, they make the argument that, look, that Karine-A ship that was carrying the arms. That was evidence enough of the Palestinian Authority's connection to that and to violence in the Middle East.

Mr. Rahman, your response to what Mr. Pinkas was saying, because incidents like that just undermine Yasser Arafat.

RAHMAN: First of all, Yasser Arafat has not acquired his credibility from Mr. Pinkas or from the Israeli government. Yasser Arafat is elected...

PINKAS: And he has a Nobel Prize to prove it...

RAHMAN: Can you hold? I waited for you, Mr. Pinkas, until you finished.

PINKAS: Go ahead.

RAHMAN: Please give me that courtesy.

Yasser Arafat is the elected leader of the Palestinian people. Yasser Arafat kept his commitment to all agreements that we signed with Israel. Israel has reneged on every single agreement that we signed with Israel, including the third deployment of Israeli troops into the Palestinian territories. The economic protocol that we signed with Israel not to build Jewish settlements in Palestinian territories.

Israel reneged on those agreements, and that's what created the lack of confidence among the Palestinian people.

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: Please. You are ridiculing the complaints of the Palestinian people against Israel, but you never refuting any of the things that I said...

PINKAS: I can refute it by acknowledging you're lying.

RAHMAN: I don't want you, because you did not.

PINKAS: I know you don't, because you hate being confused with facts.

RAHMAN: You know that what I said is true. When you have the United States, and we know why the United States is biased towards Israel, you know, the power of the American Jewish lobby in the United States is very, very influential...

(CROSSTALK)

RAHMAN: ... in the foreign policy.

VERJEE: Make your point, Mr. Rahman.

RAHMAN: Yes, my point is we have to look at what the international community is saying also. The closest allies of Europe in the Middle East and in Europe, they are telling the United States don't isolate yourself with Israel in one corner, because that will be very counterproductive to the peace process...

VERJEE: Mr. Rahman, the Palestinians keep saying the same thing. We've heard these arguments over and over again. No one appears to be listening to you. Don't you think it's time that the Palestinian Authority should change its strategy, do something about it, take the ownership of peace into your own hands and you come up with something instead of waiting for Israel or the United States to come up with it? You can shift the mood.

RAHMAN: We are not saying to the United States that they should replace us or be substituted for our actions. What we are saying is that under the state of siege in which we live, under the situation of total closure of the Palestinian territories, when Palestinian police stations are being bombarded by Israel, when the infrastructure of the economy of the Palestinian territory, it is difficult to succeed in combatant

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violence, unless there is a commitment and change of behavior by the Israeli military forces of occupation, it is difficult for Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority to succeed.

VERJEE: Alon Pinkas, I want to get Alon Pinkas in on this.

Mr. Pinkas, the crisis is just not about Israeli security only. At the heart of it, what Mr. Rahman is bringing up is the occupation by Israel of Palestinian territory. I mean, you're boxing in Yasser Arafat. You know, the violence is spinning out of control. What's that going to get you? Don't you think that Israeli should come up with something and think of a way to push the issues forward, because politically getting rid of Yasser Arafat isn't going to get you anywhere, is it?

PINKAS: You're absolutely right. We're not getting rid of Mr. Arafat politically. He did it himself. This is self-inflicted, like almost every other tragedy the Palestinian people have experienced or undergone.

But back to your question, we did come up with a peace plan at Camp David. And I know...

VERJEE: But don't keep bringing up Camp David, though. Let's push it forward, though. What can Israeli do now?

PINKAS: I cannot not bring Camp David up. That was a comprehensive peace plan that was put on the table under the auspices of an American president with the support of the entire international community that Mr. Abdel Rahman invokes -- and incidentally, this invocation of the international community is reminiscent of the 60's and the 70's in which the Palestinian found refuge in the lovely hands of East Germany and Bulgaria and the Soviet Union.

So when it's convenient to the Palestinians, the United States is an ally. And when it's not, they use Belgium or France or Italy. But that's beside the point.

VERJEE: Alon Pinkas, we're out of time. The Israeli counsel general. Hassan Abdel Rahman, the chief Palestinian representative to the United States. Good talking to you on Q&A. We'll have to have you back on the show to finish your conversation.

Jim Clancy is going to be back for another edition of Q&A in just a few hours. That's at 20:30 GMT.

That's at Q&A for now. The news continues, here on CNN.

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